Radio Folk Radio Talk
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"NIGGER JOHN" WARE

~~(Canadian Cattlemen, Sept.1938)~~

(Editor's note--The information herewith written about WNigger John" was gathered, bit by bit, from those who knew him, and certain excerpts are taken from 'Rangemen'. Any reader who has had experience with or can relate incidents of John Ware is invited to communicate with the Editor. Word from Sam Howe of Duchess, Alta., and Arthur Peake of Dorothy, Alta., each of whom we are told rode the range with John Ware would be appreciated.)

Of the many interesting characters who stand out in the history of Alberta and the range country, there is one who must not be omitted. To the young there are stories related about him that they will always remember. ~~To those who knew him, he was "white".~~ His name was John Ware. He called himself: The first "smoked Irishman" to ride the Canadian range.

It was in 1883 that a young, burly negro who had left his southland made his way far to the north. He was first heard of in this country when eager to work, he tried to get a job looking after horses for a survey outfit which was going west from Winnipeg. The appearance of a "dude" negro so dapper in his dress, right to his shining patent leather shoes, and with not a cent in his pocket caused amusement among the crew of surveyors. It was a real "tenderfoot" they had in their midst and they couldn't resist the opportunity to haze him. The foreman needed men for his outfit, and after talking to John, offered to take him on if he could ride a certain horse, though he intentionally neglected to tell him that he would be given his test on the worst one in the bunch. Ware responded by saying that he hoped he wouldn't "break his neck", and otherwise indicating his general ignorance of riding by askingg what the stirrups were for, and how to get on the horse. A

crowd quickly gathered to see this negro "greenhorn" ride for the first time a real bad bronco. With instructions to get up from the left side, and with some help, he was put astride the horse; then, it was the spectators who were surprised. How he rode that bronk! rode him to a standstill. When John had been a slave boy on a southern plantation, the master had made the negro children ride the mules and horses bareback, and they were beaten if they couldn't stay on. The joke was on the surveyors; after that they quickly "took" to Ware with his droll, naive way of making friends.

With this outfit he came westwards. In southern Alberta, or what was then the Northwest Territories, he was hired as a cowboy. He worked for many ranchers, herding horses and cattle. His agreeable nature and likeable character won him many friends among his employers and the cowboys. His honesty was unquestioned. The extent of his profanity was "dang", much to the amusement of all.

When he arrived at one place he was hired to assist in night-herding, claiming that he knew somethihg about cattle. He was without saddle or horse, and was left to do all the work, again being taken for a "greenhorn". It must have given him a great deal of inward glee to be surprising all the cowboys and foremen of the different outfits where he worked. He was given an old battered saddle and a very old, quiet horse at this ranch. Looking over his outfit, he remarked, "Ah say, boss, ef yuh'll jest gimme uh little bettah saddle en uh little wuss hoss, Ah'll think mebbe Ah kin ride um." This was all the men needed. The procured a good saddle and the worst horse they could find, and there were some bad

ones in the outfit. The negro swung awkwardly up to the mean animal and gave him the ride of his life. The cowboys, amazed at this performance, took him in as their equal. He was not long with the outfit until he was placed in charge of one of the herds; he had also shown that he knew cattle.

Sometimes when large herds were driven through a district it was possible for local stockmen to pretend that some of their cattle were lost in the herd. This was one form of rustling which was not uncommon. It happened, when Nigger John was herding some cattle northwards for the Bar U outfit, that two Montana men approached him with a story that he was taking some of their cattle which had mingled with his. They demanded him to stop, to sort their strays, hoping that he would tell them to get the "lost" ones and be on their way. Showing that he had the right kind of courage, he refused to stop and told them they would have to follow the herd until it bedded down for the night when he would assist them to find their cattle. They proceeded to show force, when they saw that Nigger John was calling their bluff. But he was too quick for them, and with his quirt in hand, he had the two men lying senseless on the road. They were not heard from again to claim their "stock".

He also worked on the Quorn ranch, named after the Quorn Hunt in the Old Country, the members of which supplied the capital for the ranch. Over one hundred Irish hunter mares were shipped out for Barter, the foreman,and Nigger John to breed from for the Canadian Agricultural Colonization Company. Being a fine rider with ability to break any horse brought him the esteem of fellow-riders. It was a common thing to hear men say, "Let

Nigger John break that colt, he's the only one who can." It was not by cruelty but by strength that he was able to manage them. He made green horses do as he would have them do.

True to the nature of his race he had many fears of imaginary things, and the cowboys could not resist teasing him at every opportunity as he was so good-natured about it all. One trick they played on him was to slip a field mouse into his pocket and wait around until he, unknowingly, would put his hand on it. The howls he set up when he touched the squirming, furry animal could be heard for miles. Another favorite prank, knowing his fear of snakes, was to put a horse-hair rope under his bedroll. After dark, when he had rolled in, they would start tugging at this rope. Poor Nigger John would leap out of bed and crash through the tent, thinking a snake was crawling under him, and the cowboys would howl with laughter.

One incident that might have ended more seriously, happened when herding cattle for a round-up. The Old Man River in Southern Alberta had to be crossed and Nigger John could not swim. To make matters worse, the horse he was riding, and unbeknown to John, couldn't swim either, an unusual thing among horses. It was high water time. He started in, and found himself in trouble. Cowboys realizing his predicament, threw a rope around both, pulling them to shallow water.

John loved the open range. He did not believe in fenced-in leases. On the North Fork of Sheep Creek he finally secured a place of his own, next to John Quirk's. He proceeded to run his horses and cattle here, the brand for the latter being 9999 on the left side. Known by all, he was received on an equal basis

with his white comrades. He was "white" himself in everything but color. His popularity grew. If it were late at night and someone were ten miles away from his house, and closer to the house of a white man, they would invariably choose Nigger John's to go to. While out riding one day he came upon two strange men on Fish Creek. They told him they had come out from Quebec and were camping until they could locate. While they were away from their tent, it had been burglarized and burned to the ground. Nigger John's kindheartedness overtook him and as they were lamenting, especially losing their $150.00 in cash, he removed his wallet from his pocket and loaned them there and then that amount until they could get located and could repay.

He finally sold his ranch in the hills to a young Englishman named Carey, and moved to the Red Deer River near Duchess. After the deal had been made and some payments given, Carey came to Nigger John and refused to make the last payment. His reason was that there were bugs in the place. Nigger John innocently remarked,"Why Ah jest want money fuh the ranch, the bugs wuh jest throwed in with the place."

In the meantime, John had made the acquaintace of a colored girl from the Lewis family who had come west from Toronto to homestead east of Calgary. One Sunday, he took the girl and her mother to a church in Calgary. On their return a terrific thunder storm overtook them, the lightning flashed around them and suddenly a bolt crashed down and instantly killed the team of horses he was driving. The ladies and John were untouched, a miraculous escape. He took the harness off the team, and getting other horses from a homesteader, drove home. His horses, dead, were left lying on the road where they fell.

From that day on, the road at that point made a wide curve around the remains of the fallen team. Miss Lewis and Nigger John were married about 1890, a short time after this incident.

Some people declare that he could boast the rare distinction of never having been thrown from a horse. This may not be so, but he did ride effectively and when rough riding he was at his best. He would hold on only by clutching with his knees, bouncing all over the horse's back, laughing the whole time. He was a strong, large man, although not over six feet tall. When astride a horse he filled the saddle from "stem to stern". He was a master roper also. For a number of years Nigger John and Mike Herman were the champions of Alberta, or the West. A feat he performed in Calgary was considered a world's record performance. His aim was a huge steer weighing about 1,500 pounds. He came out with his favorite rope horse, swung his rope and caught the steer. In 59 seconds it was tied helplessly on the ground.

As the years rolled along, Nigger John stayed closer to his ranch near Duchess. With age and lessened activity he grew heavy of build. That did not prevent him, however, from being astride a horse. It was a sad occurance when one day Nigger John's horse, a quiet cow pony, came in without his rider, the irony of his fate. A general alarm was sent out and ranchers assembled to find what had happened. After riding and searching, they found their old friend on the ground. He was to sleep forever. Near him was a badger hole; the presumption was that catching him unawares, the horse had stumbled into it, throwing and falling on its rider. Nigger John's neck was broken; he must have died instantly. It was on the prairie where he had loved living; his last minutes were spent "in his boots."

I would like to once again call the attention of the old-timers, their children, grandchildren and friends, to the old-timer's reminesence contest sponsored by the Alberta Folklore and Local History Project. There 's a little prize money for the winners. First prize is 15$. Second Prize is 10$ and third prize is 5$ for the best set of old-timer's or pioneer's experiences sent in to us by June Ist, 1944. We are especially interested in personal experiences, but anyone may compete, telling the expwriences of a parent, or grandparent who helped to pioneer in some part of Alberta.

You know, sometimes the old folks need some persuading before they'll relate their stories. They seem to have the idea that what they did isn't important.....that their experiences were just the record of their day by day living. We've got to show them that their experiences were vitally important in the creation of this Alberta land, and we must encourage them to give us the record, so that it may become an important part of our history. So, any of you listening, who know someone with a real story to tell, lend us a hand. Go to see that person, ~~xxxxx~~ get him to tell his story. Write it down, then check back with him to see that it's straight. Send it in to us.